

Understanding Socio-Cultural Change Today: Reflections on the Implications of the Postdigital for Cosmopolitanism and Europeanization

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Abstract *In this chapter I look at how socio-cultural change should be understood in contemporary society. My focus will be Europe, though some of what is discussed has more general application, at least to western societies. I discuss the concept of the 'postdigital/digital' and argue for locating this concept in a wider and more sociological framework. Essentially, I am interested in how socio-cultural change plays out today and to what extent cosmopolitanism is part of the picture. I argue that cultural change cannot be explained only by reference to culture; it is also necessary to consider wider structural change.*

Introduction

How to understand socio-cultural change today?¹ What key markers of socio-cultural change come to mind? The digital, cosmopolitanism, generational shifts, post-truth and conspiracy theories, post-material values (including life-styles and identities), and, within Europe, the consequences of Europeanism are some examples of phenomena that can be seen in terms of socio-cultural change. Climate change can be included, for it too is a cultural matter, not simply a political or structural one, in that it has an existential dimension and is expressed on the level of the symbolic and is now part of the cultural model of society in that contemporary societies now interpret themselves through climate politics. All of these examples are related to shifts in self-understanding and collective identities.

In this chapter I discuss the big picture of major transformations in the socio-cultural make-up of contemporary society, with a focus on the specificity of the European context. In view of the interest in this volume on the digital/postdigital and

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its relation to Europeanism – which I prefer to call Europeanization – I will give particular attention to the claim that we are living in a postdigital age.

I have used the term socio-cultural to highlight the fact that a feature of culture – not just today – is that it cannot be separated from the social domain, in the way that older and now largely discredited views of culture took for granted, for example the idea of a high culture uncontaminated by society or the idea of cultural anarchy, a mismatch between the cultural sphere and social reality.

As a starting point, I see culture (beliefs, values, meaning, traditions, identities etc.) as entailing symbolic, normative-ethical, aesthetic, and cognitive dimensions. It contains the imaginary and is the site of learning. We know now from phenomenological sociology that culture consists of practices; it is performative and constructed, in the sense that it is not fixed or given, and it is material. Culture is embodied in social reality, and it is political and thus contested, the site of struggles over power and meaning.

I would also like to assert that from a sociological perspective an analytical distinction needs to be made that distinguishes the cultural dimension of society from the structural (economy, state, the biochemical, and material foundations of society) and also from the political. In reality, these are not separate from each other, but they have to be analytically separated. So, cultural change can occur before or after structural change. They relate to each other in complex ways.

Major Structural Transformation in Contemporary Society

Today, there is a major transformation in the structural context. We are in a period that can be characterized as the end of stability, at least as far as western or European societies are concerned. The period since 1945 was one of exceptional stability and one in which peace also reigned. It was, to be sure, a European peace and one in which several dictatorships (in Central/Eastern Europe and the Iberian peninsula as well as Greece) survived and was, for a time, compatible with colonialism. This social world was based on industrial capitalism, the geopolitics of the cold war, highly rigid gendered divisions, conventional morality sustained by fairly strong social institutions such as the family and churches, all of which domesticated society. The structural context that was the basis of this social and political order has gone, beginning with the crises of the 1970s, the rise of neoliberalism, the fall of the European dictatorships, the end of the cold war, and globalization etc.

Two main perspectives dominate any account of social change. One that sees change occurring within a broader situation of stability, continuity or persistence as the dominant trend; and one that sees change in the present crisis and transformation. The former position, I think, has been refuted by historical events.

The current situation is marked by a strong sense of rupture that comes with the final end of the era of stability. This is not primarily one of cultural, or socio-cultural change, but of structural change as well as political change. The model of capitalism that developed with neo-liberalism, essentially one of global markets, globalization and the dominance of financial capitalism, has entered into a serious crisis, with a return to protectionism and with that political authoritarianism. In Streeck's (2014) terms, capitalism is quite literally running out of time, having successfully postponed the day of reckoning through various strategies of 'buying time'. In addition, there is the dual crisis of climate change and energy, the latter exacerbated by the war in Ukraine.

The result of this situation is a deep division in most societies between those who can be described as the 'winners' and the 'losers' of globalization. There are now many examples of a 50/50 divide – deeply engrained social and political polarization – in western democracies between what can also be characterized as a conflict between the post-national political community and the nationalist one (Delanty, 2018; Fligstein, 2008). In other words, there is a new division between those who largely identify with national culture and those whose horizons have been extended beyond the limits of the traditional markers of class and nation. In the context of the post-2008-10 upheaval following the financial crisis that began in 2008 this set the conditions for a further cultural and political clash between two very broad spectrums of the population, which can also be termed "nationals" and "cosmopolitans". The resulting polarization is not just the outcome of different cultural values spheres, but of a deep transformation within capitalism. The illusion that capitalism is something everyone benefits from is now no longer a credible claim, in view of the stagnation of wages, major income disparity and a supra wealthy global elite (Turchin, 2023). This has driven a deep wedge in contemporary societies and, as Peter Turchin has shown, has brought about a major transformation in the political landscape in the United States, to the point that democracy is in danger.

This conflict plays out in different ways, including across generations, but there is a general clash between the radical or populist right (with the support of the extreme right) and the centre ground as well as the left. This is reflected in, for example, the politics regarding climate change. In western countries at least, it appears to be the case that climate change is regarded as high priority by the educated urban middle classes, but very low priority for other groups. This difference maps across patterns of social polarization that are evident in the support basis for Brexit in the UK and for Trump in the United States and generally for support for right-wing populism. It also plays out in adherence to conspiracy theories, which have become a feature of political culture today.

Capitalism has produced a new class of the precariat and has underlined the security that the middle class once enjoyed. However, the resulting clash is not simply a cultural clash, as in the notion of cultural wars between the winners and the losers

of globalization, for there are no real winners. The cultural wars are driven by the transformation in work, and by the lack of security and precarity that now extends into the middle class (Asmanova, 2020). The Covid-19 Pandemic exacerbated these trends. It should be noted that these groups, which I have referred to as cosmopolitans and nationals, are not tightly defined or homogenous, but are rather internally variable and volatile.

Finally, there is the context of the war in Ukraine, with the ever-present danger of an escalation leading to nuclear war but the more likely prospect of a 'forever' war between Ukraine (and hence Europe) and the Russian Federation. This situation has led to a new Iron Curtain, and a new global division that re-organizes the multi-polar world that appeared to be taking shape in the 1990s between the U.S. and China. According to Branko Milanović (2019), there are now two types of capitalism competing with each other, liberal meritocratic capitalism and political authoritarian capitalism, including failing democracies.

So, my argument so far is that I do not think any account of cultural change can ignore the structural situation (both in national societies and in the global context) and the major crises of our time, which I have briefly sketched here. In other words, cultural change cannot be explained only by reference to culture.

The Concept of the 'Post'

Before going to the question of cultural change and the vexed question of the post-digital, let me begin by addressing the notion of a 'post'-phenomenon, which I have already invoked twice (post-material) and can easily add 'post' to cosmopolitanism, as in 'postcosmopolitanism.' What does it mean to say something is post and is this a helpful term?

As I understand it, the prefix 'post', in the most meaningful sense possible indicates (1) that something is at a sufficiently advanced stage whereby by the continued use of the term without the qualification 'post' would see only the old form and not the emerging new shape, which contains elements of the old and the new.

It can also (2) imply a strong critique of the phenomenon as a redundant concept to describe something that has ceased to exist or (3) in a yet stronger form it refers to 'something' that never in fact existed, an illegitimate category.

Thus, to take the most famous post concept, the postmodern. The most useful rendition of the term I suggest is that of Zygmunt Bauman, who in *Legislators and Interpreters*, one of his most interesting books, defined the postmodern as a reflective stage of the modern, modernity taking a critical look at itself (Bauman, 1987). In this sense, it is not something fundamentally new, but integral to modernity itself. In the second sense I indicated, as in Lyotard's famous definition in *The Postmodern Condition*, it signals a rupture with modernity, which is no longer a relevant term to

understand the present (Lyotard, 1984 [1979]). Then, in this vein, we have Latour's stronger argument in *We Have Never Been Modern* that modernity is not necessarily coming to an end – it never existed in the first place (Latour, 1993 [1991]). In other words, it is a mistaken or illegitimate term to begin with (Latour, of course, did not use the term postmodern, but it was implicit in his argument and often used in this sense). While similar, all three signal different meanings of the notion of 'post,' with the first two being the principal meanings. My view is that the first use, as in Bauman's use of the term, makes the most sense. In any case, Lyotard's argument has been mostly contested since it is based on a caricature of modernity and does not take account of the many counter-currents that have been as much constitutive of modernity as the 'grand narratives' that he sees debunked by the postmodern, a term that was later used by Frederic Jameson and David Harvey as the condition of late capitalism.

I would like to suggest that all three senses of the post can be found in the notion of the postdigital. Lack of clarity gives rise to much confusion and much confusion remains. As indicated, my view is that the most meaningful use of the term is the first sense, namely the idea that the phenomenon – be it the digital, modernity, American, the west – continues (it is not at an end) but has undergone a sufficient degree of transformation that its continued use fails to recognize the changed circumstances of the present context. This applies to the whole of culture and relates to the problem of the 'in-between,' the time of crisis and transformation. I think we can discard the third sense and the second is highly problematic – i.e. that the phenomenon is passé.

A further problem of course relates to how one should know where we stand in history? If the post refers to the end of something and the beginning of a new era, how do we know that a new era is about to start? We may be at the beginning of an era, as the notion of the Anthropocene suggests. This notion challenges the very idea of the post.

Before proceeding further, I would like to comment on another problem with the post concept, since what I just argued is not a vindication of the term. It can too easily be just a bad theory. Here is why. Post-arguments, as in the notion of the postmodern, are essentially corrective arguments, unless they are very strong arguments, as in Lyotard's thesis, which I think has been invalidated. That is to say, a post-argument is a corrective of an argument that needs to be qualified. Now, with the passage of time the corrected position comes to be accepted as the only reasonable one. I think that was Bauman's position, namely a more critical and reflective interpretation of modernity than outright rejection and an announcement of something entirely new. While I agree with this attempt to bring a stronger dimension of self-problematization to bear on the phenomenon in question in order to correct a problematic theory, there is the danger that one of the other senses of the term becomes, in effect, a substitute for the loss of meaning of the old term. Even if this is

not the case, there is the problem that the corrective becomes in time the new norm, when in fact it is based on a correction of an illegitimate theory or concept. My view, then, is that many of these post arguments are based on bad theories of the past that have been used to interpret the present.

This is the case with the notion of the postdigital (which I discuss later). However, there is a sense in which it can be meaningful, as in the claim that the digital revolution is now over (assuming this to be true) and that digitalization is the current reality of contemporary society. This reasoning could also apply to the notion of post-modern society: The modern has arrived everywhere, it is no longer new. So, once we have agreed on that, we can continue to use the term, digital, modern etc. My conclusion then is that the prefix 'post' is not ultimately helpful. One problem nevertheless remains: Since almost every concept in social science is contested, we can easily have a situation in which every concept is defined as a post-concept. Erik Swyngedouw (2020) has argued that, for the discipline of geography, there is now a post-political condition in which solutions that oppose the existing regime are constructed as impossible. But what does this really mean? In effect, it means nothing more than the condition of hegemony, where the given order, in this neo-liberalism, is naturalized and cannot be criticized. Considering that market-based politics are indeed questioned, and while dominant are not hegemonic, this is a problematic argument.

Perhaps, one way of overcoming some of these conceptual problems is not to over-burden a concept as a theory. The notion of the postdigital can only make sense when located within the context of a wider theory of social change.

Major Socio-Cultural Change Today

My argument in the foregoing is not what it may appear to be, namely a pedantic exercise. I wanted to draw attention to an aspect of cultural change, which is that cultural change over the past three decades or so has now come to an end. The new has arrived, but it is nothing new anymore. That is to say, the tremendous transformations brought about by the internet, the new social movements of the 1970s/1980s, European integration, the end of the Cold War, globalization and the cosmopolitanism that was a feature of the 1990s have reached a point at which they are no longer transformative. That is obviously not to say that an endpoint has been reached, but their transformative potential has been reached, if not exhausted. These movements have crystalized and only their consequences remain, but they continue as important currents in our historical present. We cannot say that they have simply vanished.

Let's take some examples. The New Social Movements that came to the forefront of politics in western societies since the 1960s have now been largely exhausted of

their revolutionary impact. Feminism is nothing new anymore (which is not to say it has not achieved its aims or that it no longer exists). Emancipation can be as much the rallying call of the extreme right as of the left. As we know from the writings of Foucault, the pursuit of emancipation can be the basis of new kinds of domination which appear as forms of emancipation. The New Social Movements of the 1970s are in any case now the old ones. The new ones are Black Lives Matter [BLM], eco movements, for example, as regards progressive politics, and there is a plethora of social movements of the right, which all see themselves as emancipatory.

Europeanization fits into this pattern whereby a process enters into a more complicated situation with numerous crisis tendencies and counter-currents. The post-Second World War project of European integration is widely believed to be in crisis today. But is it? Examples of crisis tendencies include some of the following. There has been a weakening of internal cohesion; since 2016 Brexit has been a major weakening of the EU as an economic bloc; the problem of non-compliant members, e.g. Hungary and general political instability as a result of the growing dominance of the extreme right; eastern enlargement has stalled with several members of the former Yugoslavia frozen out (Serbia, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia) as well Albania; uncertainty around Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, and Turkey probably permanently out. Sleaze in the European Parliament has added to the EU's legitimacy problem. The rise of new authoritarian regimes on the margins of the EU, principally Russia and the Russian-Ukrainian war, presents a serious challenge that the EU is ill-equipped to handle. The EU was born of a desire to prevent war in Europe. While war within the European Union is now the past of Europe, the reality today is that war has come to haunt Europe again as the current war will in all probability morph into a frozen war with a permanent threat to security resulting from the need to protect Ukraine, which will inevitably acquire union membership.

However, without going further into the woes of the EU, I do not think these crises mean Europeanization is in terminal decline or there is a deep legitimacy problem or some kind of systemic fault. On the contrary. Rather, many of its objectives – for example, peace between France and Germany – have been realised. New problems inevitably arise when the old ones have been solved. In many ways, its success has led to the onset of new problems. European integration is simply an accomplished fact; it is no longer a project. European societies have been irreversibly Europeanized. This is true too of Brexit Britain. In fact, Brexit – aside from being a catastrophe for the UK; it is an example of a failed project which is now deemed to have officially failed – demonstrates the impossibility of leaving the EU, or at least the impossibility of leaving behind Europeanization. It has served as a warning to others. Strangely, in this case the recognition of failure does not extend to regret. We may nonetheless see a gradual process of re-alignment with the UK slowly returning to the EU. It should also be noted that the nation-state itself is also in crisis – the idea that the EU is in crisis in contrast to stable nation-states is a myth.

The European project has from the beginning been a multi-tiered and perhaps also a multi-speed project that does not require the abolition of the nation-state but its structural transformation. As with any process of integration, there will be degrees of re-balancing and re-structuring (see Jones, 2018, Patberg, 2020). So, I do not see a return to something historically prior. This is also the case with Brexit: The UK has not gone back to where it was before it joined. The current situation regarding the EU is rather one of partial reversals and reorientations. The EU may not be going forward to 'ever greater union,' but is also not going backwards. A pertinent example is that since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 there has been a re-orientation of the EU around a common security and energy policy.

Let me give a short digression on a related matter. I have argued in various publications that Europe today is 'post-western', in the sense that it is no longer defined by the context of the Cold War when it was largely shaped by the western core states allied to the USA (Delanty, 2003, 2006). Since 1989, Europe has been redefined in a way that encompasses the wider diversity of civilizations that have constituted its history. This, what I have referred to as an 'inter-civilizational constellation', includes the relationship to Russia, as it does the Byzantine, Jewish, and Muslim heritages. The term captures the sense of multiple and entangling civilizations, as opposed to a singular and now discredited notion of 'Western Civilization' and its modern successor 'The West.' Inspired by T.W. Adorno's use of the term, the concept of a constellation suggests a pattern that is not underpinned by a fixed or objective structure.

Where does cosmopolitanism fit into this picture? This is more complicated since the term has many meanings. I do not use it in the sense of world government or the overcoming of the nation-state by some kind of supra-national body, nor do I use it as a highly normative term to describe a desirable state of affairs. Cosmopolitanism, as I see it, is essentially a condition of openness to the world. It is expressed in the opening or expansion of horizons—not just the fusion of horizons—and comes into play in the encounter of the Self with the Other whereby a shift in self-understanding takes place. In this sense, cosmopolitanism accords with the logic of dialogue, since dialogue entails incorporating the perspective of the other. So, this is a hermeneutic understanding of cosmopolitanism but one that is also critical in that it goes beyond mere understanding, beyond the other to self-problematization and a questioning of what was previously taken for granted (see Delanty, 2009, 2019).

The appeal of cosmopolitanism can be accounted for as an alternative to the violent nationalism that was a feature of much of the 20th century, but also due to the desire for a normative critique of globalization. Rather than being an affirmative condition, it is transformative and is produced by social struggles. It is arguably the case that despite widespread anti-cosmopolitan trends, there has been a worldwide increase in the recognition of cosmopolitan principles and the carriers of it are more likely to be oppositional movements seeking to advance global social justice.

In this sense, it is more of a 'bottom up' movement than one deriving from global elite culture or transnational institutions. The notion of a rooted cosmopolitanism has been invoked to capture this notion of an everyday cosmopolitanism. The reception of cosmopolitanism in the social sciences, as well as in post-colonial thought, whereby cosmopolitanism becomes linked with empirical social phenomena, makes it difficult to claim that cosmopolitanism is only an elite phenomenon or something that has somehow failed. It is increasingly associated with the claims to rights of groups previously excluded from political community.

There is no doubt that the current situation has seen the rise of counter or anti-cosmopolitan trends. But these do not define the present. I am also suggesting, in line with the argument I have established, that cosmopolitanism is no longer something new. But that is not to claim that the present is an era of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan currents are an inextricable aspect of contemporary society; but so too are the counter-currents.

To be sure, a significant shift in political discourse has taken place in recent times, but not a major transformation in the EU, which has remained remarkably stable. The resurgence of nationalism does not alter the fact that the world is more interconnected than it is divided. Anti-cosmopolitan currents have certainly become more pronounced, but like all movements they are fraught with contradictions. The 1990s saw a rise in cosmopolitanism but a drop in labour protection, which unleashed anti-cosmopolitan trends. For all of these reasons, I do not think it makes much sense to say that cosmopolitanism is exhausted, or indeed the contrary, that we live in a cosmopolitan world. The reality is that cosmopolitanism is a force in the world, as is anti-cosmopolitanism. Social reality cannot be understood as a zero-sum condition, whereby something is either absent or present. It makes more sense to see degrees of a phenomenon present.

In this context, we can consider the notion of post-migrancy, a concept I take to refer to a situation that exists in many European countries, but by no means all, but especially those Western European post-colonial societies, such as Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, that experienced waves of migration from their former colonies since the 1950s. In some cases, this includes migration from the south to the north of Europe and Turkish migration to West Germany. In all of these cases, migration transformed the host societies such that, as vividly illustrated by Britain, there is no longer a clear-cut native culture, assuming there ever was one. This has led to a changed understanding of multiculturalism, which is no longer premised on the existence of a majority culture that tries to accommodate minority cultures. The reality is that the majority culture has been transformed. In that sense, we have post-migration societies, that is societies that have already been transformed by migration (and not societies that no longer have migration). Again, this also demonstrates the futility of Brexit, which was driven by the desire or fantasy of a specific segment of society to return to a world in which Britain was inhabited by white people.

Another feature of socio-cultural change that I would like to discuss is generational change. Following Karl Mannheim in a classic essay, generations are not just a group born at the same time but have an identity shaped by the events that define their cohort, which may be a traumatic event or a major historical experience (Mannheim, 1952 [1927]). The notion of a generation reveals the impact of major demographic trends. Let us look at some examples, mindful that many notions of generations are loose popular terms, not socio-scientific concepts.

Baby Boomers: Those born circa 1945/6–1964/5 (sometimes seen as born in the 1940s and 1950s). The term was created by the U.S. Census Bureau, but it includes the '68 generation, i.e. those who went to university in late 1960s, many of whom were agents of cultural and political change in Europe (the 1968 generation were the first of the baby boomers, born in post-1945 period).

Generation X: Those born in mid 1960s–1980s, the era of “alienated youth” who grew up in the emerging neo-liberal era. The term apparently was coined by Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel *Generation X*.

Millenniums (or millennials): Those born in the early 1980s to mid-1990s, the generation who grew up in a more globalized era, but one that was also neo-liberal. The Millennials brought racial and cultural diversity to the mainstream and can be characterized as “cultural omnivores”, i.e. for whom there is no distinction between high and low culture (see de Vries, 2021).

Generation Z: Those born from the mid-1990s to circa 2010 (early 2000) Generation Z are the ‘Zoomers’, the first to have grown up in a digital age, in contrast to the baby boomers, who grew up in the era of the car.

The generations that came after the boomers had to compete with larger populations, which kept wages down (Duff, 2021: 25). With some generations there is a strong cultural difference, even a clash, between them and their parents, especially between the baby boomers and their parents, who were born before the Second World War. Generations are characterized by collective historical experience. They are not necessarily exclusive and can overlap and co-exist. While the notion of a generation in part reflects popular culture, the notion does correspond to something authentic that is not captured by other collective categories, such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Generations are nonetheless agents of socio-cultural change, as Karl Mannheim recognized, or at least expressions of cultural change.

The arrival of Generation Z is perhaps a point of entry to the digital/postdigital situation.

Digitalization, the Postdigital and AI

What I am essentially doing is placing the digital in a wider context, and more generally to interpret the current situation or the major transformations of the present time. Digital culture and digitalization are part of the fabric of social formation. As I suggested in the foregoing, we have to see it as part of the socio-structural context.

As I see it, the postdigital is not a term that can be applied to the wider society, as in the notion of a digital era, as there are other designations of our time that are more appropriate. It is a term that can only refer to digital phenomena, namely the conversion of analogue information into other forms, such as texts, images, sounds etc. But the notion of the postdigital does open up wider issues – in the sense it invokes other social processes that are not themselves digital. A key point, in line with the above reasoning, is that the current situation is one in which digitalization is no longer new, or revolutionary. It has become the new normality. So, the ‘post’ prefix is seeking to qualify the newness of the digital and affirming a continuation rather than a rupture with digitalization.

This characterization is consistent with the other examples I have mentioned, especially postmodernity. However, it is perhaps worth suggesting that there may be just one sense that marks the digital era as different. Perhaps it may be the case that the real revolution has yet to come. I am thinking here of the potential impact of Artificial Intelligence. This may not be quite within the technological limits of the digital, but it is clearly part of the technological innovation begun by digitalization (and the related field of nanotechnology). AI has brought the information age to a new stage, letting aside for now whether the term ‘information age’ is an adequate account of contemporary capitalism, as Manuel Castells argued in the 1990s.

So, I venture the claim that the most significant transformation in the digital world is the advancement of AI. This is a major, even revolutionary transformation of digitalization (Elliott, 2022, Nowotny, 2021). The massive amount of data that digitalization generates – as a result of Big Data, datafication, and algorithms – produces the need for artificial intelligence in order to make sense of the data, which is too large for the human mind to process. Thus, AI is given a rationale in computational decision-making. This represents a step more significant than cyber-reality, mediated interaction that came with the digital revolution.

Now, as I said, while it is being increasingly recognized that digitalization is becoming the new normal – and hence the notion of the postdigital – I am not convinced that this is the case with AI as it potentially morphs into AGI – Artificial General Intelligence. We may be at an early stage in its development, but it is important to note that this is not yet a reality. AGI refers to a super artificial intelligence whereby robots acquire the ability to learn without being confined to performing logistical or mechanical tasks given to them by humans. Unlike AI as it currently stands with generative AI as its most advanced embodiment, AGI is a different phe-

nomenon that is not dependent on humans for input or control. It is in effect no longer based on the model of a machine but an autonomous form of super-intelligence (Bostrum, 2016).

Castell's famous account of the "Information Society" was characterized by a strong sense of the capacity of human agency to control it. It was also compatible with cosmopolitanism and the notion of autonomy that is often seen as a basis of modernity, the fundamental impetus of freedom. But what if it were the other way around? Is there not a danger that the new brave world of robotization/AGI represents a movement into the post-human domain – another post? What about some of the potential technological developments yet to come? Some of these may be benign, products of human intelligence and subservient to human needs. But there are also the dystopian scenarios and potential visions of the end of humanity. The possible rise of AGI can be seen as a postdigital development that while a continuation of the digital it marks a significant movement into a new context, which has been called the 'new singularity' (Kurzweil, 2005). What if it seized control? This is a risk, which is probably implausible. It has been argued that it cannot come about (Landgrebe & Smith, 2023). Such scenarios are of course examples of the very long term, but they do give a sense of the direction of technological transformation that has already begun, since the fear now is that such developments could come about as a result of things spiralling out of control following on from, as yet, unanticipated technological innovation. Were such a scenario to come to pass we would definitely be in the domain of the postdigital in a more ominous sense of the term.

Conclusions

Cultural change today is more bound up with technological change than ever before. The transformation of digitalization by AI is one of the greatest developments in the structural context. It is obviously not specific to the EU. One outcome of cultural change arising from digitalization is the fragmentation of consciousness. The individual lacks not a direct relation to social reality, but also lacks a mediated one since there is only mediatization. There are potential advantages for the future from AI, but also great dangers in developments around super intelligent machines that go beyond the dangers that lurk in algorithmic governance. It is impossible to draw clear conclusions about future trends from the current situation. It may be the case that our fears of AI are related to anxiety about the unknown.

This relates to a wider aspect of our historical present, namely the fact of deep anxiety that is probably a product of a great deal of uncertainty in many areas of social life. As mentioned, precarity has now extended into the middle class and increased social polarization has led to a more volatile political context that is now complicated by climate change. While there is some justification in seeing in the

present the signs of a permacrisis – a concatenation of multiple crises – democracy is not static and a major force in the world, as is cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan sensibilities are most evident in young people, who are today especially in Europe more likely to be university educated than their parents, as well as being more digitalized in their lifestyles. It may quite well transpire that the generational difference will play a major role in shaping the future. At the moment, this is largely expressed as a cultural clash, but it has the potential to become a greater force of change. For the first time the current generation of young people will be less well off than their parents. The resulting discontent has not yet found a political voice. This is a contrast to the discontent of older people, whose experience of loss of status in our digitalized and globalized societies has found a voice in authoritarian and anti-cosmopolitan politics.

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